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ABSTRACT

It is important for special education administrators to recognize the potential disaster that might result from inattention to the mental health needs of their staffs and organizations. Indications of staff "burnout" (rapid turnover of staff due to stress) are already apparent. The phenomenon can only be detrimental to the whole concept and mission of the special services organizations in school districts. Much of the stress experienced is directly attributal to the implementation requirements of Public Law 94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act). The three important tasks for an administrator in fostering mental health for individuals and organizations are: (1) to diagnose the environmental conditions influencing the organization or individual, (2) to implement appropriate change strategies aimed at eliminating or minimizing stress conditions, and (3) to determine the effectiveness of the strategies implemented and the mental health status of the organization or individual. In a formal assessment of the mental health of an individual or organization three criteria (adaptability, identity, and reality-testing) are used to judge the health of the individual or group. (Author/PHR)

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THE ADMINISTRATOR'S ROLE IN FOSTERING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF SPECIAL SERVICES PERSONNEL

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THE ADMINISTRATOR'S ROLE IN FOSTERING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF SPECIAL SERVICES PERSONNEL

Introduction

Preventing "burnout" among special services personnel is becoming more and more the preoccupation of administrators in districts both large and small. Some of the indicators of staff "burnout" are:

1. The increasing amount of time administrators are spending recruiting, hiring and providing orientation for new staff members, primarily due to the high turnover rate;

2. The growing role confusions, resentments and interpersonal problems between regular classroom teachers, special educators and administrators. (Morsink, Blackhurst and Williams, 1979; D'Alonzo and Wiseman, 1978.)

3. The increasingly open resistance to the "red tape" of federal, state, and, sometimes, local regulations and procedures related to the education of the handicapped. (Ryor, 1978)

Many administrator's have discovered that the amount of staff "burnout" within a school district is directly related to the degree of stress experienced by individual staff members and by the special services organization as a whole. Even with such indicators as those mentioned above, it is difficult to measure the amount and/or degree of staff "burnout" in a given organization. It is even more difficult to measure the environmental stress associated with the roles of special services staff members. Despite these difficulties, it would be naive for any of us who are daily faced with the challenge of educating the handicapped to think that our job performance and individual mental health are not significantly effected by these conditions of stress.

A recent study conducted at the University of Connecticut (Bensky, Shaw, Gorse, Bates, and Dixon, 1979) provides some insight into the impact of environmental stress on individual special services staff members. One of the study questions was: "What do you now do to deal with stress on the job?" Approximately 140 experienced regular and special education teachers responded. A content analysis of the responses reveals that the participants' methods for dealing with stress can be synthesized into 14 major groupings. Seven of these groupings representing approximately 83% of all the responses made are described in Table 1.

It is interesting to note that less than 50% of the methods cited for dealing with job stress (numbers 1 and 2) seem to be directed at the underlying problems causing the stress. At best the remaining Method Groups (numbers 3 - 7) can be characterized as avoidance behavior. Can we say that this behavior is characteristic of mentally healthy personalities functioning in professional roles? Certainly, not! In fact, it would seem that this approach to the problem of stress for educators can result in nothing more than a reduction in the quality and the level of services provided for handicapped students.

Defining Mental Health

It is the intent of this discussion to focus on the administrator's role in fostering the mental health of special services personnel. While he or she may not be totally responsible for the climate and conditions under which the staff must work, the administrator, as the organization's leader, plays a key role in determining what that climate will be. With the advent of P. L. 94-142, special services administrators are finding themselves having to both manage the effective delivery of educational services to the handicapped, as well as to monitor the organization's compliance with the various due process mandates of the law. More and more, parents and other child advocates are forcing administrators into adversary positions with respect to what, when, where, and how special services will be provided to students. The dilemma for administrators is to find a way to assist the staff in meeting the requirements of the law, while, at the same time, helping them to survive the attempt.

Defining mental health in relation to the individual staff member or the organization as a whole is important for the administrator who is determined to eliminate or minimize the impact of the "burnout" syndrome. J. P. Chaplin (1975) defines mental health as, "a state of good adjustment with a subjective state of well-being, zest for living, and the feeling that one is exercising his talents and abilities." Another view of mental health is provided by Marie Jahoda. (1958) She describes a healthy personality as one who, "actively masters his environment, shows a certain unit of personality, and is able to perceive the world and himself correctly." We are sure that there are other definitions of mental health that would serve us as well or better. However, Richard Lazarus (1976) cautions us against using any definition as an absolute standard for mental health. Because of the differences in environmental conditions under which people live and/or work, there is a need for a relative standard of health---one which takes into account these differing conditions.

For example, how many of us have paused long enough to realize that, despite the fact that the degree of compliance with P. L. 94-142 ranges far and wide among school districts, almost every district is experiencing the same growing pains. This is especially true in such areas as management, due process and service delivery. In short, it does not matter all that much whether your district is rich or poor, well-staff or understaffed, urban or suburban. The impact of the law or, at least, the perception of that impact is the same for everyone. Let us look at some examples:

1. Both well-organized and poorly organized special services departments on both local and state levels, are having an unbelievably difficult time getting a good handle on the law's child count requirements.

2. Many districts have yet to be able to mount effective in-service or personnel development programs for a significant proportion of the regular education staff within the district.

3. Not even well-staffed districts are finding it possible to meet in a timely fashion the requirements of annual and triennial reviews for every student.

4. The number of mediations and hearings are increasing with many decisions being found against school districts, in spite of what the laws say or imply about:

   a. unilateral placements by parents and outside agencies

   b. the importance of least restrictive environment

   c. the provision of services comparable to those offered to students in regular education

   d. the school district's responsibility to pay only the special education costs for outside placements

The concern is that, even though environmental conditions vary from district to district, the phenomenon of organizational and/or individual stress resulting from the implementation of P. L. 94-142 is experienced almost uniformly. Have you noticed that we hear less and less talk of the more advanced special services departments being better off than those in less sophisticated districts? As time goes on we are finding that no one really understands what the full impact of P. L. 94-142 will be on the education enterprise. Still, Richard Lazarus' (1976) point about using a relative, rather than an absolute, standard of health is important to remember. As administrators attempt to improve the mental health status of their staff and organization, they should do so with local environmental conditions, as well as external influences in mind. Lazarus' suggests that, in order for us to say that a person is coping well, that person must be successfully accomplishing the following four tasks:

1. tolerating or relieving all or some of the attendant stress.

2. maintaining a sense of personal worth despite defeats.

3. maintaining rewarding interpersonal relationships.

4. meeting the specific requirements of the stressful tasks, or utilizing available opportunities to accomplish any of the above tasks.

Administrators can verify that staff members about whom they have the most concern, indeed, have been relatively unsuccessful with the four coping tasks described by Lazarus. For example, one of the most tenured special services staff members in a local school had been struggling for several years to meet the requirements of her job under very stressful conditions.

The only way this staff member was able to maintain a sense of personal and professional worth as long as she did, was through the positive interpersonal relationships she had developed with her colleagues in other schools throughout the district. The central office administrator attempted to counsel her on strategies for putting up with the nonsense she was getting from the administrators in the school she serviced. He even offered to transfer her to another building. Unfortunately for the school, but fortunately for her, this staff member finally left the system for a similar position in another agency. She is now doing exceptionally well, both personally and professionally.

In retrospect one can see that this staff member and the central administrator failed to fully appreciate all of the environmental factors impinging upon the situation they were attempting to resolve. This was particularly true with respect to the organizational climate within the school where she was assigned. If there is any one thing one can learn from this experience, it is the fact that the mental health of an individual staff member is intricately tied to the mental health of the organization in which he or she is working. The challenge for the administrator is to understand that preventing "burnout" among special services staff will require him or her to employ strategies that promote the mental health of both the individual and the organization as a whole.

Fostering Individual And Organizational Mental Health

Now, let us address ourselves to some specific questions. What is the role of the special services administrator in fostering individual and organizational mental health? How should one approach this problem, and what are the essential tasks to be accomplished? How do we know if

our efforts are having a positive effect? To some, these questions sound like those we often ask when preparing an individualized education program (IEP) for a student requiring special services. Well, in a sense what we are about to describe is very much like the I. E. P. process. In other words, we are suggesting that the role of special services administrators is to:

1. diagnose the environmental conditions influencing the organization or individual;

2. implement appropriate change strategies aimed at eliminating or minimizing stress conditions;

3. determine the effectiveness of the strategies implemented and the mental health status of the organization or individual; and, if necessary, recycle the process back to task one.

A. Diagnosing Environmental Conditions

The task of diagnosing environmental conditions can be accomplished primarily through simple observation. Depending on the situation, the special services administrator may want others to assist him/her in such observations. Also, other methods of collecting data can be employed---like surveys, polls, and the like. The point here is that there must be a conscious, systematic effort made to determine what factors seem to directly or indirectly bring about the stress conditions. This would be true in both individual and organizational situations of stress. As the administrator attempts to carry out this diagnosis, we suggest the use of some sort of general framework in which he/she can categorize the observations. Hersey and Blanchard (1972) provide two models which can be useful here. The first model is, perhaps, more suitable for organizational stress situations. This model, described in Figure 1, involves three variable classifications; causal, intervening, and output.

Causal variables are those independent variables that can be changed by the organization and its management. Such variables as state and federal laws are not included here because they are beyond the control of the organization. Intervening variables represent the current condition of the internal state of the organization. These variables are reflected in the organization's commitment to goals, its motivations, communications, decision making, and capacity for effective interaction. Finally, the output variables are dependent variables which reflect the achievements of the organization. Using this model the administrator can determine what type of variables seem to be the most active in bringing about the stressful situation. In fact, to some extent, the administrator may be able to predict which variables are likely to be influenced when adjustments are made in others.

Thus far, we have discussed a model for diagnosing the environmental conditions affecting the operation of an organization. But, what about the environmental conditions that influence the individual staff member? Again, Hersey and Blanchard (1972) offer us a model by which this diagnosis might be carried out. First, the authors postulate that the environment for the individual consists of, at least, himself, his followers, associates, superiors, the organization itself, and its job demands.

The second point made by the authors is that, with the exception of job demands, all other variables consist of two components; personality and expectations. Personality is defined as consistent behavior patterns of an individual as perceived by others (this component is sometimes called style). Perceptions of what seems to be appropriate behavior for one's own role or position are called expectations. Expectations also include one's perceptions of the roles of others in the organization. A modified version of the Hersey/Blanchard model presented in Figure 2 illustrates this for a special services staff member.

It is important to note that all these variables are interacting components of the organizational setting in which the individual exists. Each of us can conjure up instances where either we as individuals, or someone we knew, were caught up in a stress situation caused by poor interaction with one or more of these components. Once we consider both the personality and expectations parts of each interacting component, we begin to understand how very complex an individual's environment can be.

With this model the special services administrator can gain a great deal of insight into the underlying causes for an individual staff member's feeling of stress. Also, the administrator can use this model to analyze the environments of those staff members who seem to be coping well, or who exhibit positive mental health characteristics. Perhaps, something can be gleaned from the diagnosis of the environments of these staff members that would be helpful to others in the organization.

B. Implementing Change Strategies

While we have spent some time discussing methods for diagnosing the environmental conditions that bring on stress, we need to spend only a brief period discussing the implementation of change strategies. The basic reason for this is that the models we described in the previous section can also serve as frameworks for implementing the changes a special services administrator feels would promote the mental health of his or her organization or staff member. Simply stated, the role of the administrator at this point would be to use whatever personal or official power he or she had to directly or indirectly bring about changes in one or more of the variables which make up the environmental situation affecting the individual and/or organization.

For example, one local administrator realized that a major cause of stress for special services personnel was not so much the increased diagnostic, instructional, and compliance responsibilities generated by P. L. 94-142, as much as it was the varying competency levels among the staff for carrying out these responsibilities successfully. In short, no single staff member seemed to possess all of the prerequisite skills and knowledge to deal effectively with the problems associated with serving the handicapped. However, there were many among the staff who had previously demonstrated their abilities to solve or effectively deal with certain aspects of these problems.

This administrator's strategy for reducing stress within his organization was to promote a skills-sharing process among the staff by encouraging and providing financial support for the implementation of a series of mini-inservice activities. These inservice workshops were proposed and implemented by individual staff members for their colleagues, and usually focussed on a specific skill or piece of knowledge. Participants became involved in these activities on a self-selection basis, depending on their individual needs and motivation. The workshops were usually single session events of no more than one to two hours in length. This strategy helped to reduce the negative impact of stress on the organization by:

1. improving the professional status and personal self-worth of those who proposed, developed and successfully implemented workshops in which their colleagues participated; (It should be noted that this strategy also benefited the organization by developing a cadre of experienced consultants and inservice trainers who could function both within and outside the school district.)

2. diffusing to a wider extent among the staff those skills and knowledge necessary for effective organizational operations and delivery of services to students;

3. increasing the number and variety of opportunities for establishing positive interpersonal and professional relationships among the staff.

Obviously, the actual strategies used by a particular administrator would depend on the situation and the people involved. There are no surefire approaches for developing mentally healthy organizations or individuals. Let us not forget that what works in one situation may not work in another. However, there is one thing that is common to all or most situations. That is, the administrator can be viewed as an important variable in situations of environmental stress. Overlooking this fact could mean the difference between success or failure when implementing change strategies.

The special services administrator's actions must be perceived as credible by the organization and/or the individual. In essence, the administrator must be a visible change agent---not a secret agent who spends his or her time behind the scenes manipulating everyone and everything. Whenever posible, the administrator should avoid coercing the organization or staff member into a particular change. Encouraging or allowing staff participation and involvement is usually more productive in the long run.

Before moving into our discussion of the third task in the administrator's role as a promoter of mental health, there are two points to be made about the use of the Hersey/Blanchard (1972) models as frameworks for implementing change strategies. First, let us look at the model we have suggested for situations involving individual staff members. When working with a staff member who is having trouble coping with a stressful situation, the administrator should be sure to analyze all of the environmental components interacting with that staff member. While the change strategy eventually employed might involve only one or two of the five components, it is always good to get the complete picture first. An analogy for this is the situation where a psychologist administers a complete WISC, but does not find it necessary to make recommendations relating to the results of every subtest.

The second point concerns the Hersey/Blanchard (1972) model involving causal, intervening and output variables---the one we suggest administrators use to diagnose the environmental conditions of an organization experiencing stress. When using this model as a framework for implementing strategies, the administrator should be aware that the most important of the three variable classifications is the causal variables. Attempts to improve the intervening variables directly will be much less successful than those aimed at influencing them indirectly by modifying certain causal variables. Similarly, efforts to improve the output variables by attempting to modify the intervening variables will usually be less effective than changing the causal variables.

C. Determining Mental Health Status

At this point we should discuss how the administrator can determine the effectiveness of the change strategies. Simply stated, it can be done through observation, particularly if we are talking about strategies used to promote the mental health of an individual staff member. In this situation, the four coping tasks of Lazarus (1976), which we described earlier in our discussion, can serve as criteria for our evaluation. All the administrator has to do is to assess whether or not the staff member in question has developed a greater capacity to cope with his stressful situation.

For example, has the social worker been able to relieve some of the attendant stress by reducing the number of times he has to communicate face to face with the department head who likes to discuss in public

confidential information about students? Or, has the speech clinician been able to maintain her sense of personal worth, despite the fact that after 5 years of the same treatment the school continues to give her a 6 by 4 windowless room to work in? And, what about the psychologist who had a tendency to practice his Gestalt therapy on resistive parents or dissenting colleagues during placement team meetings? Has he been able to cease alienating others? Is there evidence of his developing and maintaining rewarding interpersonal relationships? Finally, has the resource teacher, who has been working with a particularly disruptive group of students, been able to meet her classroom responsibilities in a more satisfactory manner than in the past?

If these questions can be answered positively in these kinds of situations, the administrator may assume that the change strategies used have been effective. Further, he or she may assume that the mental health status of his staff members is improving.

When assessing the mental health status of his organization, the special services administrator may want to use a more formal approach. Criteria for determining whether change strategies are working can be extracted from Marie Jahoda's (1958) definition of a healthy personality, which we reviewed earlier in our discussion. The three basic statements in this definition can be related to specific criteria in the following manner:

1. "actively masters his environment": i.e., <u>adaptability</u>

2. "certain unit of personality": i.e., <u>identity</u>

3. "able to perceive the world and himself correctly": i.e., <u>reality-testing</u>

Within each criteria area certain questions might be addressed by the administrator or the organization itself, in a kind of self-assessment. For example, in the criteria area of <u>adaptability</u> the following questions might be raised:

1. Does the organization demonstrate effective problem-solving capabilities?

2. Is the organization flexible enough to learn through experience?

3. Can the organization maintain an adequate level of functioning while adjusting to changing internal and external circumstances?

In the area of identity, the questions could be:

1. Are the organizational goals and overall mission generally understood and accepted by the personnel?

2. To what extent are the individual's perceptions of how the organization

works in harmony with other perceptions?

3. To what degree does the organization recognize and accept the different perceptions among the personnel as to how the organization really works?

Finally, the criteria area of reality-testing might stimulate these questions:

1. To what extent has the organization developed techniques for determining the "real properties" of the environment in which it exists?

2. Does the organization have a fairly objective view of its own strengths and weaknesses?

If a majority of these questions can not be answered or are answered negatively, then the special services administrator should assume that the mental health status of his organization needs improving. Even though these eight questions are somewhat general in nature, together they can serve as a framework for judging the effectiveness of efforts aimed at improving the mental health of the organization.

Conclusion

It is important for special services administrators to recognize the potential disaster that might result from inattention to the mental health needs of their staffs and organizations. Indications of rapid staff "burnout" are already apparent, if we would but recognize them. By "burnout" we mean not only the rate of staff turnover, but also the number of persons who are remaining in their positions, but who have literally "given up the struggle" out of sheer frustration and fatigue. This phenomenon can only be detrimental to the whole concept and mission of the special services organizations in school districts.

The role of the special services administrator, under these circumstances, becomes quite clear. The only way to eliminate or minimize the problems of the "burnout" syndrome is to attend to it directly and systematically. The administrator's concern must be not only for the individual staff member, but also for the organization as a whole. Both may be in dire need of changes aimed at improving their mental health status. Since there is no absolute standard of mental health for individuals or organizations, efforts by administrators to foster mental health must be individualized in order to account for the differences in environmental conditions among people and organizations. Thus, the three important tasks for the administrator are to:

1. diagnose the environmental conditions influencing the organization or individual;

2. implement appropriate change strategies aimed at eliminating or minimizing stress conditions;

3. determine the effectiveness of the strategies implemented and the mental health status of the organization or individual.

While we have suggested various models and frameworks to assist the special services administrator in carrying out these tasks, they are by no means fool-proof or perfect. In fact, they may not even be appropriate in situations other than our own. The basic purpose of this discussion is to emphasize the administrator's role in developing and maintaining healthy individuals functioning in healthy environments.

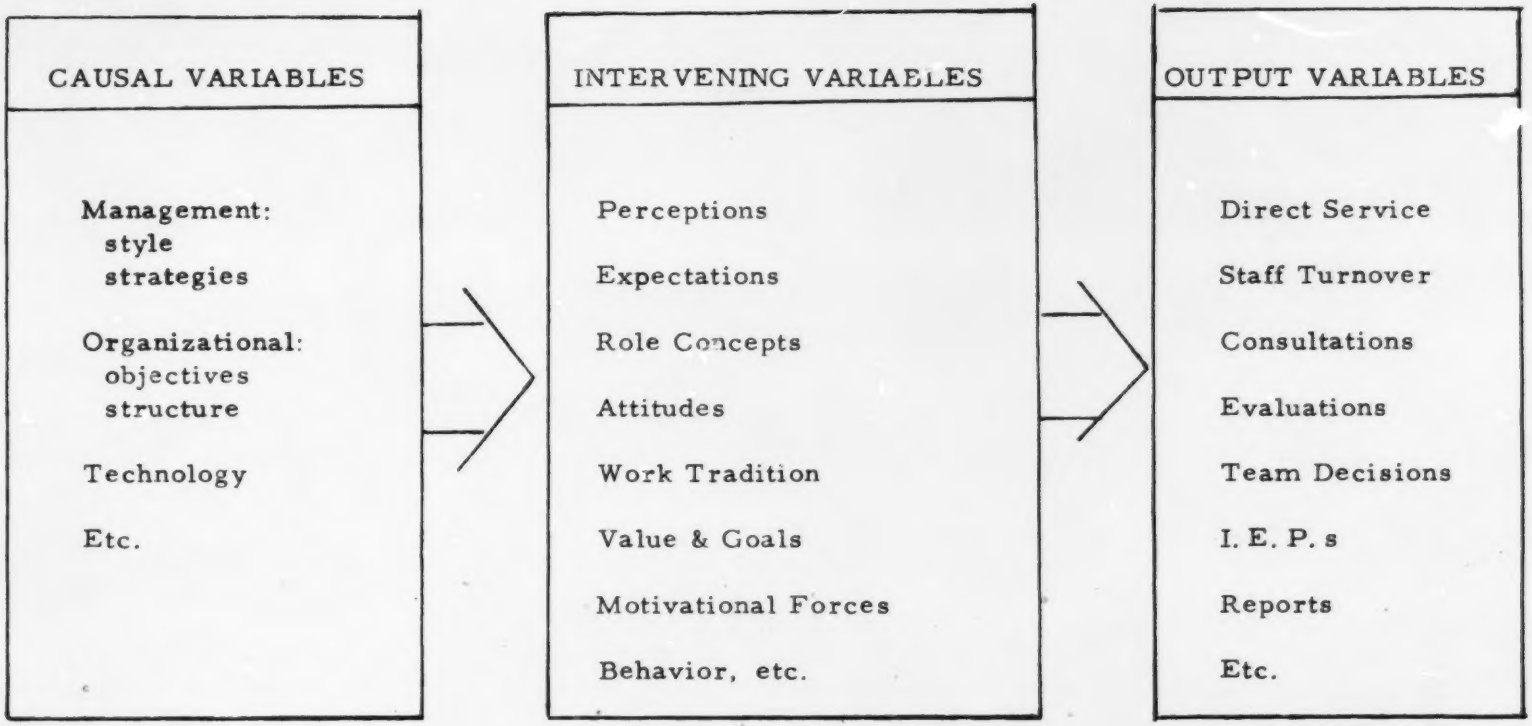
Finally, we feel all can agree that, with the help of P. L. 94-142, special services professionals are paving the way toward truly individual educational programming for every child, not just the handicapped. It is possible that by the year 2000 each child will be able to have prescribed for him or her an I. E. P. that addresses intellectual, social, physical, cultural and emotional needs. If this educational innovation is to become a reality, many dramatic changes will have to be made in the way the educational enterprise now functions. Clearly, professionals and organizational units that can meet the mental health criteria discussed earlier will be necessary to assure these changes occur smoothly and with the least amount of negative impact. As humanists dealing with the exceptional educational needs of the handicapped, we have an opportunity to get a head start in developing these mentally healthy professionals and organizational units---just as we have been given the opportunity to pioneer the development of the I. E. P.

TABLE 1

WAYS TO DEAL WITH STRESS ON THE JOB

Methods Groups	% Of All Methods Cited
1. "Rap" And Learn About It (discuss problems with others; colleagues, administrators, psychotherapist; take courses)	.35
2. Organize and Prioritize It (organize time, self; set priorities; do homework, be prepared; work through lunch)	.11
3. Stay Cool and Diversify (do relaxing activities; slow the pace; remain calm; find hobby, outlet)	.09
4. Snooze And Forget It (take nap; forget it; walk away for few minutes)	.09
5. Call Time Out Or Quit (resign; leave school environment on weekends; take day off; cancel groups; lower expectations; do nothing)	.08
6. Jog It Away (take a walk; maintain diet; exercise; jog)	.06
7. Drug It Out (drink coffee, liquor; eat; take aspirins; smoke)	.05
TOTAL %	.83

FIGURE 1


CAUSAL VARIABLES
Management:
style
strategies
Organizational:
objectives
structure
Technology
Etc.
INTERVENING VARIABLES
Perceptions
Expectations
Role Concepts
Attitudes
Work Tradition
Value & Goals
Motivational Forces
Behavior, etc.
OUTPUT VARIABLES
Direct Service
Staff Turnover
Consultations
Evaluations
Team Decisions
I. E. P. s
Reports
Etc.

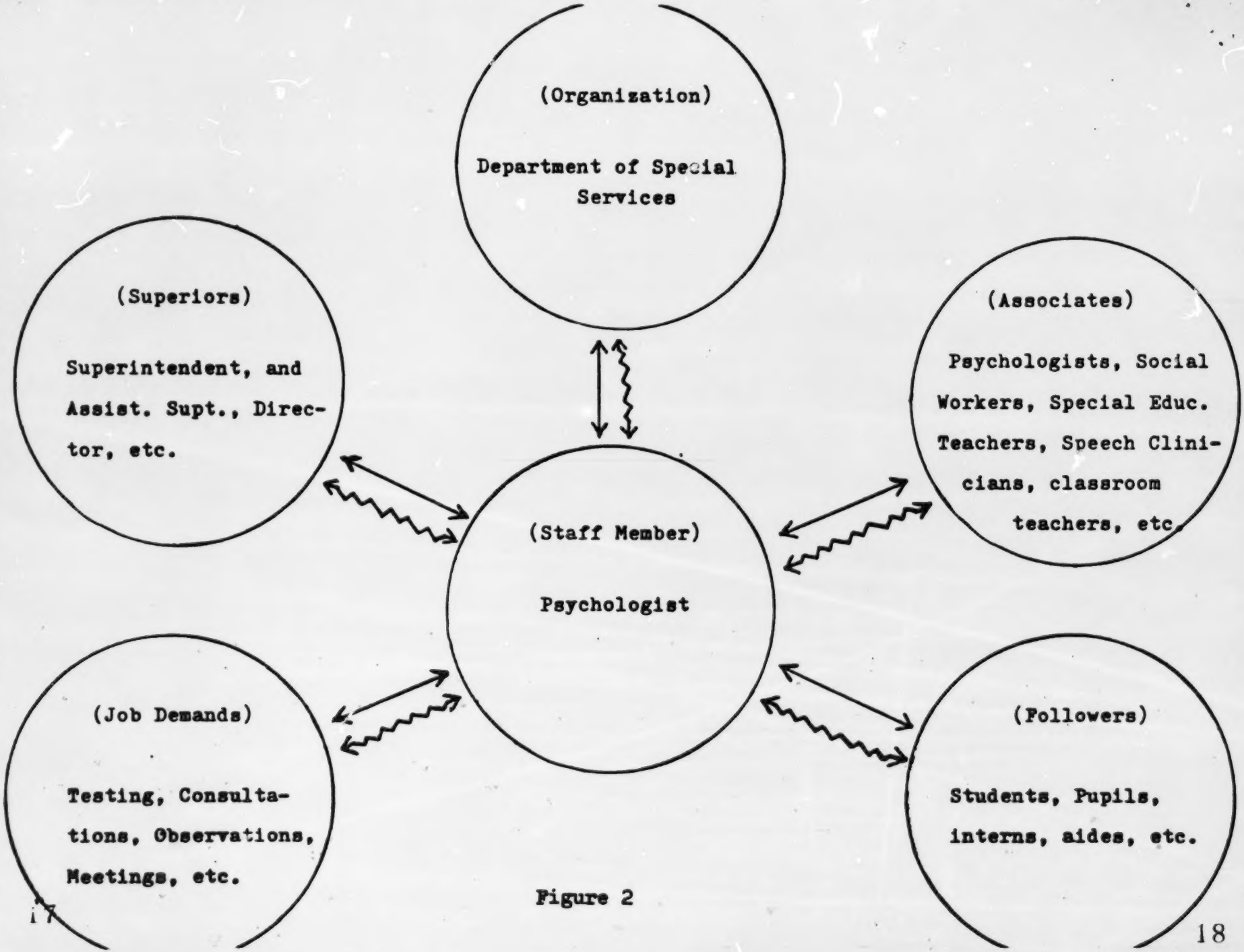

(Organization)
Department of Special Services
(Superiors)
Superintendent, and Assist. Supt., Director, etc.
(Associates)
Psychologists, Social Workers, Special Educ. Teachers, Speech Clinicians, classroom teachers, etc.
(Staff Member)
Psychologist
(Job Demands)
Testing, Consultations, Observations, Meetings, etc.
(Followers)
Students, Pupils, interns, aides, etc.

Figure 2

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